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Curating a Nation:

The Role of Asia's Twenty-First Century Museums in Constructing National Narratives

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Introduction

Museums of the modern world today act to preserve and promote cultural heritage, science, and art. Within the continent of Asia, museums have been crucial foci for various nations' cultural ministries. By analyzing the missions of specific museums with a critical lens, the objective of national identity and narrative building becomes exposed in the decisions of museums' exhibits and curations. Kirk Denton explains in a 2014 article that museums "serve important political and ideological functions in the nation-building process..." as they lay "... historical foundation for the modern nation-state and [offer] citizens a narrative around which to cohere" (Denton, 27). Denton's framework of national dependency on museums as sources of cultural narratives and identities raises questions and concerns regarding *what* and *whose* narratives are being offered. Ultimately, it is argued that higher political and cultural institutions utilize museums as modes of dissemination in order to homogenize ideal national identities through constructing, fostering, and manipulating national narratives consumed by their local and global audiences.

Objectives

My research is comprised of data gathered through participant and direct observation, as well as scholarly research, in the countries of Mongolia, Japan, China, Thailand and India.

By following the argument explained above, the objective of this research project was to understand how various national museums within the countries studied promote specific national narratives.

The academic literature on the subject of narrative making through museums has analyzed and provided information ranging from politics, nationalism, museum curation, and status of museums in Asian countries. While these sources propose arguments on specific variables and countries, this study offers a comparative and deeper analytical approach to understanding the subversive, as well as the obvious, intentions of museums. This comparative contribution to academic work is valuable because it assists in diversifying the "Asian Identity" as various nations use similar institutions, such as museums, to foster an identity, but use different tactics within museums for the benefit of their own specific narrative. This work also adds insight to the questioning of historical interpretation and the legitimacy of truth.



The maps above are of the National Museum of Mongolian History in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (left) and the National Museum of Japanese History in Tokyo, Japan (right). These touch on the variable of "Ideal Audience." It is clear that the National Museum of Mongolian History is targeted at both locals and tourists as it is located directly in the middle of the city while the National Museum of Japanese History is not necessarily in a "tourist" zone, allowing it to be more personal and curated for the Japanese people.

Images are from Google Maps, May 3, 2018.

Results

With visiting and researching over thirteen diverse museums and a copious amount of heritage and site museums, I have found that the separate national narratives constructed, fostered, and manipulated by each museum are dependent on: I) the museum's ideal audiences, II) the sources of funding, and III) the presentations of historical events and archaeological artifacts.

The photo to the right is of a sculpture outside of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum in Nanjing, China. The words that are added at the bottom of the statue say, "Family Ruined: Never returns the son killed/ Never returns the husband buried alive/ Miseries down the wife raped/ Good heavens!" This is a form of the visual interpretation of history that impacts how national narrative is created around specific events throughout the countries visited and researched.

Photo was taken outside of the museum, November 22, 2017.



I. Ideal Audiences

The concept of "ideal audience" is multifaceted as it takes into consideration the accessibility of the museums in terms of its audiences' physical, intellectual, and financial capability. These categories can determine and alter national narratives to become perpetuated into normative ideologies of specific national or regional culture, pride and tradition.

II. Sources of Funding

Most of the museums visited for this project were funded directly by their respective country's Ministry of Culture. Some museums, however, were run on a more local, independent basis. The presentation of information and the overall dissemination of the nation's identity have stark differences between these two main financial sources: state and independent. Not only does this factor complicate issues on censorship, but it also impacts the overall care, aesthetic, and quality of the museums.

III. Presentation of History

The presentation and interpretation of historical events and archaeological artifacts is the most active variable at play regarding museums' roles in the manipulation, or reworking, of national narratives and history. The museums, along with their curators, have established authority that allows them to interpret history as they see fit. This strength is bound to affect how history is understood. This is the most crucial part of creating a common understanding among the masses.

Power over "Truth"

What is being endorsed and encouraged by this project is that audiences of museums in the twenty-first century must confront the reality of fluidity and indefiniteness within historical interpretation and narrative building.

Museums, are the backbone of a nation's cultural education. The question that must be asked when visiting museums and archaeological sites is "what is truth?" Truth is ever-changing just as time is ever-changing. Whether the "truth" offered is pertaining to history, science, politics, or general knowledge, every truth is subject to contention. It must also be noted that the production of truth itself is contingent to the powers that produce the truth in the first place.

Conclusion

The task of constructing a homogenous national narrative is a daunting, yet necessary act that national institutions must initiate if their citizens are to comply with common rule and cultural customs. Museums are tools that can be utilized by higher governmental and cultural organizations to promote and foster their ideal narratives and identities among the masses. The methods and modes of crafting these narratives within Asian museums are the essential factors that must be curated carefully in order to successively communicate and manipulate the citizens of the nations. While the word "manipulation" is not being used under the intention of accusatory diction, it stands to overtly expose the lack of agency the common citizen truly has when ruled under hegemonic powers that request uniformity in order to maintain their established authority. Museums' idealized audience members, sources of finical funding, and methods of interpreting historical events and archaeological artifacts enable nations to strategically foster and promote narratives agreeable among the institutions of power. As museums in Asia continue developing into the twenty-first century, the diversity and complexity of national narratives will adapt alongside the shifting political and cultural climates. The altering understandings of "truth" promoted by the cultural and national elite will modify and permeate the cultural fabric of Asian nations unceasingly as the present becomes history and the narratives of the future depend on the methodic curations of the past.

Key References

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Unlike the National Museum, New Delhi, Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) is funded by grants from the Indian government and the Bombay Municipal Corporation, putting it at an advantage as a museum in India.

Photo taken on April 15, 2018.